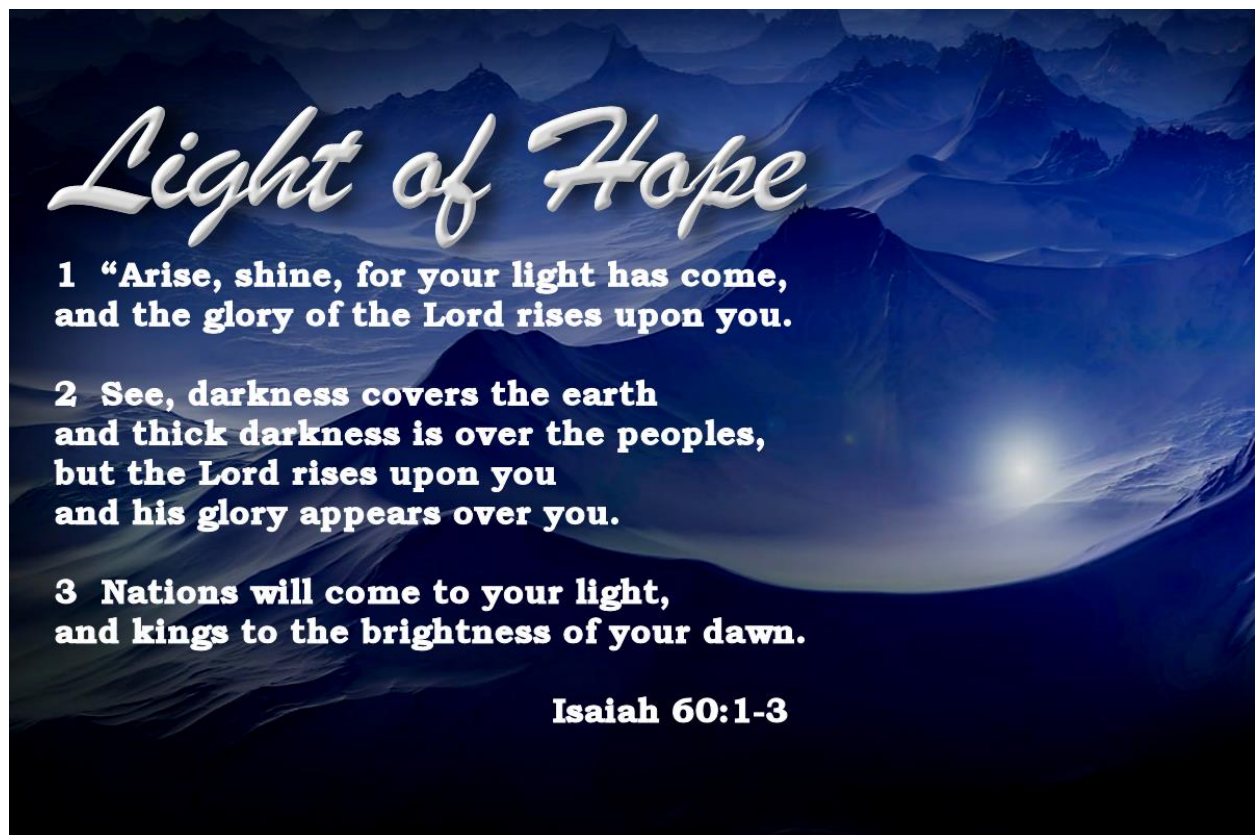


Isaiah 60:1-3

1 “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

**2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.**

3 Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.



Special Music:

“Light of the World”

Lauren Daigle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCRunZGYBi4>

Music for 1/12/2025

Praise Hymn “There’s a Song in the Air” #249 4 verses

Servant Hymn “I want to Walk as a Child of the Light” 3 verses

Special Music: “Light of the World” Lauren Daigle

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCRunZGYBi4>

LIGHT OF HOPE

Abel Stillwell had managed to get himself into quite the pickle. School had started yesterday, and it had been a bad day for him. He had only gotten three of the classes that he wanted. He had looked forward to taking Art with his girlfriend, Jackie Callaway, but the class was full by the time they got to him. Not that it mattered much since she broke up with him at lunch when he told her he wouldn't be in the class. It wasn't like he hadn't tried, but he thought she was being pretty unreasonable about the whole thing. He was beginning to realize that he might never understand women. No one told him that being a junior in high school would be so frustrating. On the way home, he kicked a rock in anger, but the rock was buried pretty deep and didn't move. So, he ended up stumbling, landing in the mud, tearing his new jeans and soaking his backpack. No, it had not been a very good start to the school year.

This morning, he made a conscious decision to just not go to school. Instead, he decided to take the day off and climb Jacob's Hill on the north side of Parable, just to get away from everyone so he could think. But he hadn't paid attention to where he was wandering. At the time, he really didn't care. He just wanted to get away. He kept trying to think of a way to change things so he could get into the Art class and then, maybe, Jackie would forgive him.

And now the sun was starting to set and he didn't recognize where he was at all. Abel thought about trying to retrace his steps, but he didn't have a clue which direction he had come from. Everything around him looked the same. His

father, Reverend Bob, was the pastor at the Methodist church. He constantly reminded Abel of how unfocused he was and that some day it would get him in real trouble. Well, that day had arrived. In his hurry to get away, Abel hadn't taken anything with him other than his jacket. No phone. Nothing in his pockets. Not even his pocketknife. No one would consider him a Boy Scout.

He looked at the trees. Wasn't there something about moss growing on trunks of trees to let you know what direction you were going? Or maybe he could follow a star. But which one? They all looked pretty much the same as they started to come out. He knew the sun set in the West, but did that truly mean West? Couldn't it be Southwest or Northwest? Abel had no clue about what to do.

He scanned the horizon hoping to see a wisp of smoke or something else that indicated the path to civilization. But he knew in his heart that it would be fruitless. After all, it had taken him all day to get lost. What made him think that we would figure out where he was in just a few minutes? He considered going straight down the mountainside, but he didn't even know if he was still on Jacob's Hill or which side he might be on. There were no fences to follow or paths to take. He wasn't going to get out of this mess by clicking ruby slippers. He was beginning to wish that he had thought to wear his boots rather than his tennis shoes. His hands and face were pretty scratched up from the underbrush. He knew he must look a sight. Yeah, he was definitely in a pickle. It was going to start getting cold real quick now that the sun had gone down, and his jacket was not going to keep him warm as the night descended upon him.

Surely someone would have missed him by now. But even if they did, where would they look? He hadn't told anyone where he was going. After all, he wanted to be alone, and he had gotten just what he wanted. No one could be much more alone and lost than Abel found himself.

He knew he couldn't stay where he was. He needed to find some shelter. The cold was already starting to bleed through his jacket. There was a chance that he might even freeze to death.

In desperation, Abel started climbing up the mountain, figuring that if he could get high enough, he might be able to see signs of where Parable might be. If he knew that, at least he would have a direction to go. He couldn't see well, so he often stumbled as the night became darker.

Suddenly, he found himself at the top, or at least what he thought was the top. Straining his eyes, Able looked for any sign of human habitation. But he saw nothing that would help. Exhausted, he sat down with his back against a tree and closed his eyes in resignation. It was hopeless, no one was going to find him up here except hungry animals. A shiver went down his spine at the thought and after that, every twig snap or tree rustling just made him more anxious.

Abel pulled his jacket collar up to try and cover his ears, but it didn't help much. The ground was cold and the wind nipped at his face.

Suddenly, he saw a light. Maybe they were looking for him. Abel leapt to his feet and called out, "Hey, out here! Can anyone hear me? I'm over here!"

There was no response. Abel waved his arms hoping someone could see him.
“I’m up here! Here I am!”

But, as his arms grew tired, he gave up waving. The light hadn’t moved at all. Abel gathered his strength and began to move toward the light knowing that it was a long way off. But he didn’t have a better plan at the moment. Carefully, he made his way down the mountainside, moving towards the light. Just as suddenly as it had come on, the light blinked off, causing Abel to stop. He was afraid to move forward without the light to guide him. Abel stood there in the cold, hoping that the light would come back on.

And then, suddenly it did, and he was able to keep moving down the mountain... until the light went off again. This puzzled Abel. What light in Parable would come on for a few minutes and then go off again? It made no sense. The light popped back on and Abel again moved forward. This time it lasted a little longer than the last time, but it did finally blink out. The situation made Abel’s progress slower than he wanted. He could feel the frustration building again as he waited for the light to come back. The boy felt like he was making no progress at all. Blink... and the light was back on. Abel racked his brain to try and figure out what was happening. Why wouldn’t the light just stay on so he could get to where it was located?

And then a thought occurred to him. Last summer, Dancer Williams had a problem with Coyotes getting his chickens. To solve the problem, Dancer had put up some high-powered floodlights in the corners of his chicken coop. He had set up some motion detectors around the perimeter. Whenever an animal got too

close, it set off the motion detectors and turned on the flood lights. That must be what Abel was seeing. Knowing this made it easier for him to wait for the lights to come back on. He continued to make his way towards Dancer's chicken coop and eventually arrived at the back of Dancer's house. When Abel knocked, Dancer answered the door. The farmer had a concerned look on his face as he saw Abel's bruises and scratches. He insisted that Abel use his phone to call his dad, who came by shortly thereafter to take him home.

As he lay in bed that night, sore from both his escapades and the chewing out that he had received from his father, Abel thought out the miracle. Yes, he considered it a miracle. Who would have thought that he had been saved by a pack of coyotes trying to do mischief? He found himself grateful for the coyotes and for Dancer's foresight to install the lights around the chicken coop. God does work in mysterious ways.

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2 See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.

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Darkness is a natural state, a universal default. The only way to dispel darkness is with light. The darkness is always there, ready to overcome its surroundings. If you don't believe that, try turning off the flashlight in the forest at night. Have you ever been in one of those caves where they tell you to stand perfectly still and then they turn off all the lights, just to show you how totally dark the cave is? It's rather disconcerting and can even cause you to lose your balance because suddenly, there are no reference points. If we are in the dark and suddenly see a light, no matter how small, it becomes the focus of our attention. It offers us hope that things will get better.

As human beings, we don't like the dark. We appreciate the light. We don't like not being able to see where we are and what is happening around us. The only time we find enjoyment in a state of darkness is when we are trying to scare ourselves. Bad things are associated with the darkness and our imaginations run wild in the dark. If we try to walk in the dark, we hit our shins or stub our toes, and there is always the fear that we will fall off a cliff or down a deep hole, or fall down the stairs. No, darkness is not human-friendly.

There are other kinds of darkness. The darkness of oppression. The darkness of depression. The darkness of loneliness. The darkness of helplessness and hopelessness. The one common factor that we can all relate to is when we find ourselves in darkness of any kind, we can't help but look to find light. Any light. Because there is hope in the light. There is possible salvation in the light. When we see the light, we see a chance to escape the darkness. Just like Abel, alone on that hillside in the dark, that light flashing on and off offered hope and a chance of changing his fate.

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The Israelites had been in darkness for so long. They struggled under the captivity of multiple civilizations. They could not envision relief from their oppression. They felt abandoned by God, left to suffer for the sins of their fathers, unable to climb out of their depression and once again become a nation revered among other nations. They felt unloved and cheated in life as they struggled beneath the bootheel of their oppressors. They were wrapped in the darkness of their misery. While they believed that one day the Messiah would come and alleviate their pain, restoring them to their former glory, the wait had been long enough they hardly dared to hope they would see the coming of their savior during their lifetime. But they also believed that when he came, he would

be a magnificent king and conqueror those who had trampled on the nation of Israel.

But, in what had to be a portent of the true nature of the coming king, a star appears, not to the benefit of the Israelites, but to engage with wise men and counselors serving the kings in the East. These wise counselors were not from the nation of Israel. They were not of Jewish descent. They were scholars, those who studied ancient texts from all over the world. They served to provide wisdom for their benefactors. And they were always looking for signs signifying the manifestations of prophecy. The scholars had access to all kinds of ancient texts that would have included books found in the Old Testament.

**“I see him, but not now;
I behold him, but not near.
A star will come out of Jacob;
a scepter will rise out of Israel.
He will crush the foreheads of Moab,
the skulls of all the people of Sheth.”**

Number 24:17

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isaiah 7:14

**“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”**

Micah 5:2

**10 May the kings of Tarshish and of distant shores
bring tribute to him.**

**May the kings of Sheba and Seba
present him gifts.**

**11 May all kings bow down to him
and all nations serve him.**

12 For he will deliver the needy who cry out,

the afflicted who have no one to help.

13 He will take pity on the weak and the needy

and save the needy from death.

14 He will rescue them from oppression and violence,

for precious is their blood in his sight.

Psalm 72:10

2 The people walking in darkness

have seen a great light;

on those living in the land of deep darkness

a light has dawned.

Isaiah 9:3

As well as our scripture today from Isaiah 60.

We don't know how many of these wise men there were. The idea that there were only three is attributed to the storyline that there were three gifts. But there could have been many more wisemen. But the star didn't catch them by surprise, because they were waiting for it. They did not know if they would see it in their lifetimes, but they remained in anticipation, just as the nation of Israel remained in anticipation of a savior, a Messiah.

So, when the star appeared, it was an epiphany! An AH-HAH moment. A celebratory moment of prophecy fulfilled. A new king had been born. A king whose reign would surpass the accomplishments of every other king that had ever ruled. How significantly awesome it was that God had chosen a star shining brightly in the night sky to be the marker for where this new king could be found. Stars were the navigational tools of the time. And this star that outshone all others, was the ultimate compass to guide these wise men and bring them into the presence of God on earth in the form of a baby.

Sometimes, I think that we struggle with our own epiphany. We want that same star to show up and guide us; to be our compass to pointing to the Christ Child. We desire a greater manifestation signifying the presence of God on earth. We want a bright star, singing angels, and halos around the Holy Family. We forget that Jesus did not come to establish a kingdom on earth, but to provide us with a path to his kingdom in heaven. We want God to change our surroundings, to fix our broken world. But what he actually came to do was to change us and our perspectives, so that we could be his instruments of change on this broken planet, so that we could be his hands and feet.

God gives us something so much better than a star or singing angels. He gives us the Holy Spirit. Rather than looking for the light of a star in the night sky, we should be looking for that light shining in and through us, reminding us that we reflect the glory of the Son of God to the world. Each of us is called to our own epiphany, that moment of realization that God is God, the Creator of all that is, and we are but his children. The moment we accept Jesus Christ as our

personal Lord and savior, when we step into our new lives built on grace and salvation, paid with the blood of Christ. That moment is our moment of epiphany. That moment when God starts to change our very nature because we believe that God has called us to a life and purpose of service to his children.

It does us no good to see the light and not follow it to its source. It is the source of the light that provides us with truth, comfort, warmth, grace, and mercy. Seeing the light is the essence of hope. Following the light brings us home.

My hope for you is that you embrace your moment of epiphany and step into the glorious and fulfilling life that God has prepared for each of you. May the wonder of light fill your soul and may that light spill over into the world around you bringing others to their own epiphany and acceptance of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

God bless you all!

AMEN